

ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S

mystery magazine

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Gambling may not only get into your blood, but into your pocketbook. At this point, there is only one way to proceed: Get what is known as a system. Now a system — simply defined — is a way of gambling by which you may be assured of never failing to win or lose.



WHERE

THE

WHEEL

STOPS . . .

by Jack Ritchie

HARRY O'CONNOR came to my office a little after five in the morning and I turned the club over to him.

He lit a cigar. "How was everything?"

"Nothing special. Just another night." I glanced at the note I'd made on my desk calendar. "Call a repairman sometime today. One of the quarter slots is jammed."

Harry shook his head. "I don't see how people can manage it. All they got to do is put in a quarter, pull the lever, and watch the wheels go around, but still they mess up the machinery."

I pulled open the Venetian blinds. The sky was beginning to lighten. "I might drop in sometime today, but don't count on it."

I left my office and went down to the big room. There was still a little play at the roulette tables, but most of the blackjack games were closed. Everybody looked gray and tired. The customers weren't counting on a winning streak now. They played mechanically, waiting to lose the last handful of chips so that they could go home and get to bed. Even the trade at the slots was half asleep.

I nodded good-bye to Pete, my night floor manager, and went outside. The rows of big neons on both sides of the street were dim in the morning light. They'd be turned off soon, but that didn't mean that the places would close. They were all just like mine, open twenty-four hours a day.

A city squad car pulled up to the curb and Fred Omer got out. His uniform was wrinkled and his gun belt sagged under his stomach. He yawned. "What's the matter, Matt? My radio told me to come here."

I looked back at my club. "I didn't call. Everything looks quiet."

A small man came scurrying out of my place. His short, quick steps carried him up to Omer. "My name is Edward Seborg," he said in a tight fast voice. "I phoned. I want to be driven to my hotel."

Omer looked him over and frowned. "You must have got the wrong number, Mister. I'm the police, not a taxi service."

The little man's head jerked nervously. "I phoned for a squad car. I demand protection."

I flipped my cigarette into the street. "Protection from what?"

Seborg wore heavy-framed spectacles. He eyed me suspiciously. "Who are you?"

I raised a thumb toward my neon sign. "Big Matt."

He edged closer to Omer.

Omer's face was curious. "How much did you win, Mister?"

Seborg's mouth tightened. "That's my business."

"Mr. Seborg," I said. "I'll send a couple of the boys home with you. They'll see that nothing happens."

The little man didn't want any part of that. He shook his head firmly and negatively.

I grinned. "Look, Mister. The last thing I want in the world is

to take your winnings away from you. You're a walking advertisement for my place. Go back to Keokuk or Peoria, or wherever you came from, and tell everybody that you won a bundle at Big Matt's."

I turned to Omer. "Do the Chamber of Commerce a favor, Fred. Take him home."

I watched them go and then went back into my place. Jenkins, my night cashier, was getting ready to leave.

"Phil," I asked. "Did we have any big winners?"

He thought it over. "No. Biggest pile of chips I remember cashing was only around two thousand. Why?"

"Nothing," I said. "Just curious."

Outside, I pulled my car out of the lot and drove down the main street. There isn't much to our town, but it's on the map because of places like mine.

The hot desert shimmer was in the air when I stepped out of my car in front of the new Harding Hotel. I had a light meal in my suite and then went to bed.

At eight in the evening I went back to the club. The sun was going down and with it came the lights and noise of a new night. The customers were shopping the street, for their own particular casinos, for the bright and famous ones they'd read about back home.

In my office, I went through some correspondence and wrote out a few goodwill checks, including one for

the hospital welfare fund. Then I lit a cigarette and went out into the big room to look over my acre of suckers.

They were dressed as they wanted to be, some in cowboy boots and hats, some in tails, in sport shirts, some women in halters, in slacks, in evening gowns. They were the bored, the hopeful, the excited, the children who wanted to play games that cost money.

I noticed the little man, Seborg, come into the club. He bought two hundred dollars worth of chips and moved over to the roulette tables. His eyes were eager and bright as he hovered around the edge of one of them and sporadically he darted in to place a bet. It was always ten dollars.

Around two in the morning I was in my office when Pete brought in a check for my approval.

He looked worried.

"What's the frown for, Pete?" I asked.

"I just saw somebody I remember. From the old days back east. Frank Dorel."

I initialed the check and gave it back to Pete. "Never heard of him."

"Only a few people have, Matt. His kind of work is specialized."

Pete went to the wall and slid back part of the oak paneling. I joined him at the small window that overlooked the big room.

"That's him at the bar, Matt. He's just getting a drink from Joe."

Frank Dorel was a burly man

with close-cropped hair. I placed him in his early forties.

"Give him five thousand," Pete said. "And he'll kill anybody you point a finger at."

I grinned. "You said hello?"

Pete shook his head. "Not me. I don't even want to be noticed." He looked out of the window again. "Maybe he's just on a vacation," he said hopefully.

Towards daylight, Seborg cashed in his chips. I walked over and watched him get nine hundred dollars in cash. "I see you had a good night," I said.

He jumped as though I'd touched him with a hot poker and quickly stuffed the money into his wallet.

"Had enough for today?"

"Yes," he said hastily. "I'm a little tired."

I grinned. "Phoning for another police escort tonight?"

His eyes met mine for a darting second. "Of course. I've heard about the muggings and robberies. A man with money can't take chances."

I walked with him to the phones. We passed the rows of slot machines. "Ever try those?"

His lips twitched with a slight sneer. "They're fixed."

I nodded amiably. "That's right. They're fixed to bring the house a small percentage of every dollar played." I indicated the roulette wheels. "They're fixed too."

He glanced at me sharply.

I smiled. "Nothing crude. It isn't necessary. They're fixed by the laws

of chance. In the long run, the house always wins."

There was craftiness in his brown eyes. "Why tell that to a customer? You might drive him away."

"Because it doesn't make any difference. The customer knows all about it, but that doesn't stop him. The laws of chance also make it possible for some people to be lucky. For a time, anyway. And that's what he hopes for. The streak of luck that will bring him a fortune. The house depends on the long average. We like a few lucky winners. It keeps up the interest."

I smiled. "I suppose you have a system?"

A protective veil formed in Seborg's eyes.

I grinned. "Don't worry. I won't steal it. As a matter of fact I could give you a dozen systems. All of which worked for a time."

When Omer's squad car drew up to the curb, I followed the little man outside. "See that Mr. Seborg is safe and healthy all the way home, Fred. He's got at least nine hundred dollars in his pocket. Can't have anything happen."

Omer looked pained. "Big deal. Not only did I have to drive him to his hotel, but I had to go up to his room and listen to him lock himself in."

"Don't let it get you," I said. "Be accommodating to a tourist. Regard it as a public service."

Seborg came back again the next night and the next. Both times he

won about seven hundred dollars.

The fifth night Pete and I watched him play for awhile. Whenever Seborg won, he had the habit of almost cackling.

"Maybe he's got something that really works," Pete said.

I shrugged. "Any system works sometimes and some place, if it's lucky enough to hit a curve in the laws of probability. But eventually the curve goes one way and the system goes another."

Pete didn't seem so sure. "But suppose that there really is one system..."

I tapped his arm with a knuckle. "You're dreaming, Pete. There isn't any such thing."

His attention went to the slots. "There's Frank Dorel."

Dorel was playing one of the fifty cent machines. He had the deadpan expression of most of the addicts.

"He looks peaceful enough," I said.

Pete smiled thinly. "You didn't read the evening papers. Red Janicki was found in the sand outside of town. He had two slugs in his head."

"It means nothing to me," I said. "I never knew him alive."

"He used to be one of the fraternity back in Chicago."

I looked over Dorel again. "You think he was sent here to do the job?"

Pete shrugged. "I don't think anything in particular and I don't want to be quoted about anything at all."

Seborg was back again the next night.

Phil Jenkins called me over to the cashier's cage at three in the morning. "We could use more cash. About twenty thousand, I'd say."

I rubbed an ear lobe. "That hasn't happened for a long while."

Jenkins shook his head. "It's happening now."

I went next door to Nick's Casino. He showed white teeth in a grin as he led me into his office. "Twenty grand? You got bad times, Matt?"

"Looks like it, Nick."

He picked up the house phone and had the cash brought in.

I put it under my arm. "I'll bring it back when the bank opens in the morning."

Nick studied me. "You got a faint worry in your face, Matt. Something wrong over there?"

I took a drag of my cigarette. "I'm not sure."

Back at my club, I joined Pete at the bar and we watched Seborg play.

His cackle when he won was beginning to irritate me. "Is the little man making us broke?" I asked.

Pete made a face. "It isn't how much he wins himself, it's what the other customers do. They're watching him and a half a dozen are riding, but heavy. Tonight it's killing us."

Pete sipped his drink. "If Seborg's got a system, it's too complicated for me to figure out. But I guess it's winning for him."

We watched Seborg place a ten dollar chip on number twenty-four. Five other customers followed along and about a thousand dollars rode on the number. The ball settled in the sixteen slot.

"He lost that time," I said.

Fred nodded. "Sure. But the average must hold up for him. He goes away richer every night. I've got a feeling, Matt, Seborg's really got something foolproof."

Just before daylight, Seborg cashed in two thousand dollars worth of chips and made his phone call.

I followed him out to the squad car. "I see you've been lucky again, Mr. Seborg."

A lot of the furtiveness and hesitation seemed to be gone. "I suppose you could call it that."

I looked up at the brightening sky. "I imagine you've had a real nice vacation. Going home soon?"

"Perhaps." He cackled as though he'd just got another winning number.

The sound grated on my nerves. "I suppose you're an accountant or bookkeeper? Most people with systems seem to be."

He smiled slyly. "I'm a professor of mathematics."

The right door of the squad car opened and Jed Wilkins looked at Seborg curiously. "Omer's been talking about you."

Seborg started to get in and then hesitated. "Who are you? I haven't seen you before."

"It's all right, Mr. Seborg," I said tiredly. "Omer doesn't work seven days a week. Jed will see that you're safe."

Harry O'Connor came to relieve me at five A.M. but I stayed at the club. At eight I made a phone call to the Acme Machines Company and asked for a couple of technicians.

When they arrived, I led them to the roulette tables. "I want you to go over these."

One of the technicians was wearing a baseball cap. He pushed the bill from his forehead with a finger. "All?"

I nodded. "Go over and through every one. Be as suspicious as hell."

I went to the bar and got a glass of tomato juice.

Harry joined me. "Something wrong with the wheels?"

"I'm going to find out."

We watched the cleaning women trying to mop the floor and keep out of the way of the few customers around at this hour in the morning.

"I heard about the little man," Harry said. "Pete thinks he's got a system that works."

"He can't have," I snapped.

Harry grinned. "Maybe not, but he's got you worried enough to do some checking."

The technicians took the wheels, one by one, into the back room and worked on them.

They were finished early in the afternoon. The man in the baseball cap wiped his hands on a rag.

"Nothing wrong with any one of them. No pins, lead, iron. No leans, dips, or holes. Any less friction and you'd have perpetual motion."

I paid them off and then had a stiff drink. I scowled at my reflection in the bar mirror. "What about checking the table men, Harry?"

He looked almost horrified. "I wouldn't even think what you're thinking, Matt. They been with us a long time and we can trust them one hundred percent. They wouldn't try anything funny."

I rubbed my forehead irritably. "Seborg couldn't have a perfect system. It's impossible."

Harry thought about it. "Why is it impossible, Matt? Because you don't want it to happen?"

In the evening, Pete joined me at the bar. His face was pale.

"What's the matter now?" I demanded.

He swallowed. "Seborg just bought himself four thousand dollars worth of chips. He's playing hundreds instead of tens."

My voice showed my anger. "He's going to lose. He's got to. That streak of luck can't go on forever."

But the little man didn't lose. I watched him cash in seven thousand dollars worth of chips.

I saw Omer's squad car parked at the curb. My temper snapped and I stalked outside. "What's the matter, Omer? Don't you even wait for the phone call any more?"

He winked. "Seborg and I got

an arrangement. The guy's tipping me good."

Seborg came out of the club and Omer held open the door of the car.

I watched them drive down the street and turn.

Three thousand in winnings tonight, I thought savagely. Maybe more tomorrow. And the next day, and the next. If Seborg really had something...

I turned on my heel and went back into the club. "All right, Pete," I snapped. "You're the expert on systems. Explain to me why I didn't have to go over to Nick's tonight and borrow money?"

Pete looked hurt. "Don't get sore at me, Matt. I never in my life said I was an expert on systems." He rubbed his chin thoughtfully. "The way I figure it is that the customer's who're riding on Seborg's coattails don't do it one hundred percent of the time. If he loses a few times, they get scared and lay off. But the thing about a system is that you got to follow it every step and always bet the same amount. If you don't, you're liable to be missing all the winning numbers and hitting all the losing ones."

Pete nodded as though to confirm it to himself. "That's what's been happening and we've been lucky. When there's been a couple of thousand on Seborg's number tonight, the house won. When his little disciples got scared and only a few hundred bucks were backing his number, Seborg won. It didn't

make any difference to Seborg personally. He always bets exactly the same amount. He's just interested in his total for the evening."

Pete sighed. "We won't always be so lucky, Matt. Once the customers start following him all the time, we might as well close up. Seborg could make us do that all by himself, if he bets big enough."

Seborg came back again that night and this time he started with six thousand dollars worth of chips.

I went to the bar. Pete was sitting there watching Seborg's play through the bar mirror. His eyes were half closed and there was a pencil and paper in front of him.

"I pay you for working," I snapped.

Pete's expression showed petulance. "I am working."

I walked away from the bar. I noticed Frank Dorel at the slot machines.

I lit a cigarette and turned my attention back to Seborg. He put two hundred dollars on number twelve and a lot of money piled up there. I put it close to three thousand.

I was conscious of a tightness inside of me as the wheel spun around.

The ball stopped on number twelve.

Seborg pulled in his winning with greedy fingers. Our eyes met across the room and he cackled.

That did it.

I waited until his eyes were back

on the wheel and then I walked over to Frank Dorel.

He didn't look up. He put another fifty cent piece in the slot and pulled the lever.

I waited until the slot ate up the money and then said, "Dorel?"

He studied me. "You know my name. You want something, Mister?"

I nodded. "Let's go to my office."

Towards daylight, Seborg cashed in his chips and came to me. He smoked a cigar. It didn't fit him, but he looked like he was enjoying it. "I'd like to talk to you," he said. "Privately."

I led him to my office and closed the door.

He sat down, crossed his legs, and flicked ash on the rug. "I won four thousand tonight."

I said nothing.

His smile was satisfied. "Yes. I have a system that really works. I've made a life long study of the laws of probability under a variety of circumstances. My system is infallible." His smile got wider. "If the roulette wheels are honest. As yours are."

I glared at him.

He waved a hand. "I've studied hundreds of systems and I know all of their faults. They are mere wishes based on superstition and luck. But that isn't the case with the one I've developed." He smiled again. "It is pure inexorable mathematics."

Seborg's eyes went around the room as though he were taking in-

ventory. "I could own this place in a matter of weeks. But that isn't what I have in mind."

"All right," I said softly. "Just what do you have in mind."

He savored his cigar. "Fifteen thousand in cash, and a thousand a week. From now on until eternity."

I looked at my hands spread out on my desk. "What do I get out of that?"

His dark eyes met mine. "In return I'll agree never to set foot in this place again."

I took a deep breath. "Why settle so cheap, Mister? Like you say, you could own this place."

He shook his head. "I have other ideas."

I studied him for half a minute and then I thought I had it. "You're going down the street? Casino by casino?"

He kept smiling. "But first I'll take care of this."

"That comes to sixty-seven thousand the first year," I said.

He nodded. "It's big money, but it won't kill you."

It was too much for me to pay; too much for Big Matt to give a little man with a system in his head.

Perhaps he read that in my face.

"Either that, or I break you," Seborg said harshly.

I almost smiled. I'm not going to argue with you, Mister, I thought. I can agree to anything. It won't matter to you or to me.

But I made it look hard. "All right," I said finally. "There's noth-

ing whatsoever I can do about it."

The little man put the fifteen thousand in his coat pocket and then wrote an address on a slip of paper. "Mail the thousand there every week. Don't ever be late."

I followed him out to the street. I had to watch this.

The squad car was waiting.

Seborg opened the right hand door. "Don't tell me Omer's got another night off?"

Frank Dorel was at the wheel. The cap fit him, but the uniform was a little tight around the chest. He turned his head. "Yeah. Omer's sick."

Seborg got into the car and he waved as it pulled away from the curb.

I went back into the club. Pete was still at the bar, frowning at his piece of paper.

"Still working?" I asked.

He rubbed his forehead. "I'm through, but I don't know what I got."

I patted him on the shoulder. "Keep at it."

He looked at me. "You're in a better mood."

I went into my office and made myself a long private drink.

Pete came in about ten minutes later. "You didn't have to go over to Nick's and borrow any money today, did you?"

I thought about it and was a little surprised. "No. I guess we had another lucky night."

Pete smiled thinly. "Maybe." He

took the piece of paper I'd seen him working on out of his pocket.

"I just don't get it, Matt."

"Get what?"

"About the little guy, Seborg."

I shrugged. "He's got a system. That's all."

Pete shook his head. "If he has, it's one that doesn't work."

I stared at him. "What do you mean?"

"Just that," Pete said. "I kept track of every play he made here last night and this morning, trying to figure out his system. I didn't have any luck there, but I found out something else."

"What else?" I snapped.

Pete looked uncomfortable. "Seborg lost about twelve hundred bucks."

I leaned over my desk. "He started with six thousand in chips and cashed in ten. But you tell me he lost?"

Pete smiled apologetically. "That's right, Matt. He may have cashed in ten thousand dollars worth of chips, but he actually lost twelve hundred."

Pete looked at me, still smiling weakly. "I know what happened, but I can't figure out why. Like I said, I was watching every move Seborg made. And so I also noticed this other guy would move next to Seborg every once in awhile."

I waited.

Pete went on. "Just ordinary looking. I seen him around the club the last week or so." He hesitated.

"At first I thought he was trying to pick Seborg's pockets."

Pete looked uncomfortable. "But it wasn't that. He was actually slipping chips *into* Seborg's pockets."

I glared at Pete. "What kind of a fairy story is that?"

Pete's expression was sheepish. "I know it's crazy, Matt, but it's the truth. Every hour or so, he'd buy a stack of chips from the cashier and sidle up to Seborg. When he thought no one was looking, he'd slip them into Seborg's pocket. And it wasn't news to Seborg. You could tell by the way they'd look at each other every once in awhile. Like a signal, almost."

Pete shook his head. "I just don't get it, Matt. Why would they want to make us think that Seborg was winning when he wasn't? What's the angle?"

I saw the angle. I saw it all now.

There would be two of them and they'd start with a stake. Maybe ten or fifteen thousand. One would keep completely out of the picture, but the other would make himself noticeable. He'd get a police escort home every morning; he'd make noise when he won and that would make it seem like it was often; he'd call himself a professor of mathematics; he'd have a system.

And he'd find himself a sucker who would panic.

I cursed softly to myself.

Pete was startled. "You should be glad, Matt. You were right. There is no such thing as a system."

We had nothing to worry about. I figure he was really lucky only one night. The time you had to go to Nick's for more cash. That's the only time his system worked. If he had a system."

I went to the liquor cabinet and made myself a drink.

"He was bound to have a streak one night if he came here often enough," Pete said. "But in the long run he'd go broke and so would anybody else who bet with him. Some system!"

A half an hour later, Pete and I were downstairs in the big room when Harry O'Connor walked into the club to relieve me.

"You can stop worrying about that little man, Seborg," he said.

Pete seemed disappointed. "You figured it out too?"

But Harry was talking about something else. "Seborg's dead. Three slugs in him."

Good, I thought grimly. At least that worked for me.

Harry lit a cigar. "They got the guy who did it too. Somebody named Frank Dorel."

I could feel a chill riding my skin.

"I was walking by headquarters when they brought Dorel in,"

Harry said. "About fifteen minutes ago. Jed Wilkins was there and he filled me in. The cops have been patrolling the Lola back road ever since the body of that Chicago man was found there. They caught Dorel just as he was dumping Seborg from the car."

Pete's eyes were thoughtful. "I wonder if Dorel did it on his own. For the dough Seborg was carrying. Or was it another one of those paid jobs."

Harry took the cigar out of his mouth. "If it was a paid job, Dorel will talk. The boys aren't going to be too gentle with him. Fred Omer's body was found in an alley off Gomez Street. Dorel was wearing his uniform when he was caught."

I hadn't bought that much. All I'd wanted was Seborg dead. But that didn't make any difference now.

A squad car pulled to the curb outside.

Pete grinned. "I guess all the boys on the force haven't heard about Seborg yet. He won't be needing a chauffeur any more."

But the car wasn't there for Seborg.

